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ABSTRACT

A teacher of learning disabled secondary students discusses the role of visual learning in motivating students and increasing their communication skills. Application of visual methods in an American and British setting is seen to have resulted in gains in self concept, motivation toward school, and in communication skills. (CL)

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VISUAL LEARNING: CREATIVE INPUT FOR THE HANDICAPPED LEARNER

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Abstract

Handicapped learners are part of the visual culture. Students enter school in the United States with amazing visual sophistication. Special educators must try to tap this visual resource in a variety of approaches including drawings, slide tape productions, single photo essays, and videotapes. These visual methods were applied in a E.S.E.A. Title IV Visual Literacy Project involving one secondary and two elementary school districts. Project students showed marked gains in self concept, motivation toward school, and in communication skills. Visual learning has vital implication to special educators throughout the world. Individual educators must seek ways to use visual resources that adapt to their own country and teaching methods.

Impact of Visual Culture

Special educators are aware that a large number of students do not learn through traditional methods. Educators have labored over precise instruction emphasizing the individual's strong learning modality. Often the simplest learning mode shared by the greatest number of students is overlooked. Visual learning is one instructional approach that can motivate many problem learners.

Today's students are products of a visual culture. They enter school with an amazing visual sophistication. Educational research calculates that by the time the average student graduates from a U.S. high school they will have watched over 26,000 hours of television (Miller 1978). It is little wonder that teachers constantly complain about their students' limited attention spans.

Application of Visual Methods

Special educators can tap the universality of visual learning. Even the most severely handicapped learner can benefit from visual learning. Regular classroom teachers have seen the practicality of using visual learning with large groups of students. Visuals provide instantaneous communication that is easily shared with all. With smaller student groups even greater opportunities exist for extensive sharing through visual activities.

Visual projects provide a sense of permanence when shared with others. It is not just another assignment to be neatly tucked away into a folder and never seen again. Just watching another student's visual production will often open up new realms of seeing. Spin-off ideas can be one of the most favorable outcomes of visual communication.

Visual projects can be relatively inexpensive. Drawing activities require paper and pencils. Elaborate color schemes can be created with a few marking pens. Toss-away items become desirable collectables for the visual classroom. Old magazines, newspapers, or anything to help illustrate texture (bits of wood, cloth, shells) are useful.

Access to more elaborate resources many times can be found in the school building. Tape recorders, sinc equipment, cameras, and videotape machines do not look nearly as frightening to "equipment crazed" students as they do to their teachers. Teachers should seek out the advice of the media specialist. These experts often guide students and teachers to other possible community resources. Completed student slide tape productions, videotapes, single photo essays, or Super 8 films add new and often startling dimensions to the communication abilities of the "so-called" handicapped learner.

Project Viewpoint

Project Viewpoint (E.S.E.A. Title IV) is a Federally funded program to research the possibilities of using visual learning to motivate and improve the communication skills of students. Ten teachers representing one secondary and two elementary districts in Gresham, Oregon, were selected as ViewPoint Staff. These teachers worked closely together with the project director to design visual activities that would encourage the use of visuals in the traditional curriculum.

ViewPoint teachers were faced with the awesome task of developing visual curriculum that would motivate, improve communication skills, and encourage potential dropouts to stay in school. Besides the six content area classes selected to work with ViewPoint one Visual Education class was taught by the project director. Half of the students in the class

had been identified by their counselors and teachers as being potential dropouts.

As secondary English and Learning Disabilities teacher in Project ViewPoint I applied visual learning in both the regular and L.D. classroom. The same visual goals and objectives worked well in both settings. With the emphasis in the U.S. on mainstreaming the L.D. students, the classroom teacher would have to be prepared to communicate in a wide variety of learning situations. Through visual activities students learned to sequence photos, write narratives, work in small groups and share final projects with others.

Some of the most successful activities have been:

1. Six student "likes/dislikes" taken with black and white film. Completed projects are framed on poster paper. Frames visually communicate something unique or special about the student.
2. Individual photo essays.
3. Slide tape productions on Aging, Teenage Run-Aways, Zoos and Local Pollution.
4. Drawings:
   - Mandalas - representations of the most important things in the student's life.
   - Illustrations of concepts
   - Self concept activities
5. Magazine clippings/student photos to illustrate parts of speech, syllables, spelling rules.

<u>One International Application</u>

While studying in England (1976-77) on a Rotary Foundation's "Teacher of the Handicapped Award", I was able to explore the possible

international applications of visual learning. The study project took place in a North England community school where most of the forty-five girls in the residential program were wards of the court.

I worked during the year with one fourteen year old girl who was identified by her Headmistress as needing special help in basic skills. Her teacher also expressed concern about her low self concept. The aim of the project was to examine the possibilities of using visuals to identify and improve self concept. Visual identity strategies developed by English photographers Dennet and Spence (1976) were incorporated with activities I had used with disadvantaged learners in the United States. Basic photography exercises proved to be a successful communication link. Not only was the case study greatly enriched by these activities, but cultural barriers (accent, backgrounds, age) were broken down by visuals. Time was the only disadvantage in this project. One year was not nearly enough time to explore all the possibilities visuals allowed. With opportunities to visually document their feelings towards home, friends, family and residential living, communication between individuals in residential programs and their support staff could be greatly enhanced.

Results of Visual Methods

Visual learning motivates students to initiate their own research and rely more on personal judgment. Fewer students need constant teacher direction in their decision-making. Relying on oneself builds self concept. Though self concept was a concern to the ViewPoint staff, no one was aware of the degree of positive impact that visuals were having on students. Post-testing on the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale (1969) showed that 76% of all students involved in Project Viewpoint substantially improved their self concept (Miller 1978). This was an even

higher percentage improvement than other Title projects designed solely to improve self concepts. Activities designed by ViewPoint staff and others adapted from the work of Canfield and Wells (1977) provided continual self concept building input.

Attendance rates went up in ViewPoint classes. A marked decrease was also noted in the total number of school dropouts. There were the individual success stories too. Students once classified as potential dropouts made incredible changes to eventually graduate as outstanding contributors to both school and community.

ViewPoint's impact was highly visable. Students were everywhere interviewing, photographing, and taking surveys. In one year the total number of students using community resources had more than doubled. Parents also noticed. They were involved in small group field-trips, special project showings, and encouraged students to visit their businesses and homes. Through visual activities both students and adults discovered how much they could learn from each other.

Further Possibilities

Visual learning has the vital implication to the future of special education. In the U.S., very few handicapped learners are segregated from the mainstream of the visual culture. Even the blind can give tactile and auditory input in creating non-verbal projects. Visual learning often is the very reason why many learning disabled have survived the regular school system. They have simply adapted their own natural abilities (visuals) to the learning environment. With increased awareness and training, educators can be effective facilitators of visual learning. Handicapped learners no longer need to leave school being illiterate. They have the potential to process vast sources of information visually. Most importantly, visuals allow the

handicapped learner to become a significant part of the educational process.

Application of visual learning can be easily adapted to individual cultures and teaching methods. Review the existing resources. How do students make use of visual learning now? What can be done to increase and strengthen those natural visual resources? The answers may be closer than you think.

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Figure Captions

1. Handicapped learners can benefit from visual learning.
2. A student's drawing, "The most important things in my life."
3. Sharing through small group visual projects.

Figure # 1. Handicapped learners can benefit from visual learning.

Figure # 2. A student's drawing, "The most important things in my life."

Figure # 3. Sharing through small group visual projects.